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ABSTRACT

This booklet was developed to assist agencies and groups in developing effective programs for single parents in rural areas. Most of the concepts also apply to urban and suburban settings, but rural parents carry the extra burden of great distances and geographic and social isolation. The handbook is organized in six sections. The first section outlines hallmarks of effective programs for single parents and covers program structure, staffing, recruitment, education and training, and curriculum. The second section provides a checklist for getting started in a single-parent program. A list of program "don'ts" is next, followed by a brief section on teen parents. A model program, the Head Start Family Education Program in Glenwood City, Wisconsin, is described in the fifth section. The final section covers program evaluation and participant objectives. The booklet is illustrated with photographs from Wisconsin single parent programs. (KC)

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EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS *for* RURAL SINGLE PARENTS

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Wisconsin Council on Vocational Education

Why this Document?

The Wisconsin Council on Vocational Education (W/COVE) is mandated by the federal Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act to provide advocacy and oversight of programs for single parents. Single parents represent a group for which educational intervention is essential to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty and low educational attainment.

W/COVE research early in 1990 revealed the Council was the only body legislatively charged with responsibility for adult single parents. (The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction is charged by state statute to administer state entitlement funds for **school age parent** programs.)

Beyond the Council's advocacy role, a variety of organizations and agencies fund or provide services to single parents:

- Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services

- Wisconsin Department of Industry, Labor and Human Relations

- Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and K-12 school districts

- Wisconsin Board of Vocational, Technical and Adult Education and local technical colleges

- County social services departments

- Private social service agencies

- A variety of community groups.

This document is to assist agencies and groups in developing effective programs for single parents in rural areas. Most of the concepts apply to urban or suburban settings. Rural single parents, however, are additionally burdened with problems created by vast distances and geographic and social isolation.

"Effective Programs for Rural Single Parents" represents the contributions of a number of people. Twenty individuals interested or involved in single parent programs in Wisconsin provided insight by responding to a written questionnaire distributed by the Council. Secondly, Dr. Kathleen Paris, PARIS and ASSOCIATES, Madison, Wisconsin, visited three model programs identified in the earlier research. The researcher interviewed participants and staff to determine elements of effective programs. The model sites were: "Head Start Family Education Program," New Auburn; "New Perspectives," Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College, Rice Lake, New Richmond, and Siren; "Self-Sufficiency for Teen Parents," Merrill Area Schools. The latter two were funded by Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act monies.

HALLMARKS OF EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS FOR SINGLE PARENTS

Program Structure

1. The group is used as a powerful tool to help individuals grow.

The program must encourage group cohesiveness. This requires a lot of interaction among group members and time for the group to bond. Most importantly, the instructor must recognize that the group itself has the most potential for motivating and rewarding individual members.

It is common for rural single parents to be without family support and isolated at home. Many do not have cars or drivers licenses. No public transportation exists. In a positive way, the group can become a substitute extended family.

2. Child care and transportation are provided.

Lack of child care and transportation are the major barriers to single parents completing education. In rural areas, simply providing funds may not be adequate, especially for teen parents. How helpful is mileage reimbursement for someone who does not have access to a car or public transportation?

The Head Start Family Education Program at New Auburn addressed both of these problems successfully by combining parent education with on-site care and education of children. Participants and their children are transported by bus to and from home. (See "An Ideal Model.")

3. The program has formal links and regular communication with all area human service agencies. Contacts are made in the earliest stages of program development.

Staff indicated contacts were much more fruitful when made during the developmental stages of single parent programs rather than after the programs were in place.

4. The program is a centralized agency linking participants to the other services available.

Program staff become case managers, helping participants utilize the array of agencies. As advocates for single parents, staff must be informed and must help clients become knowledgeable about client rights. This requires staff to establish relationships with other human service agencies.

5. Programs have clearly defined purposes and objectives.

Staff, participants, and the community should be aware of the goals of the program. In addition, to measure the extent to which a program is meeting its goals, quantifiable objectives should be set annually, at least in terms of the number to be served.

6. Follow-up services help participants continue moving forward after completing the program.

An individual may be identified as the resource person for completers. Often counselors at VTAE colleges are contact people for single parents who have completed programs. Regardless of the follow-up services identified, each participant should leave the program connected with other appropriate support systems.

Although program staff said they had not had a great deal of success with bringing former groups back for periodic support sessions, all agreed it is worth attempting.

7. **Program staff recognize the impact of the total family on single parents and their children. This can include the influence of the children's fathers. Successful programs involve interested family members, if only through newsletters.**

Consideration of the whole family is particularly critical for teen parent programs as teens frequently live with their own parents. Roles and responsibilities become confused and a program can assist families in working out new relationships. Similarly, the teen father's involvement in the program can be beneficial to him, the teen mother and the child.

Staffing

1. **An instructor's affective skills are considered as important as any single set of educational credentials. The following essential traits were identified in this research:**

- Warm
- Sincere
- Caring
- Accepting of others
- Able to deal with realities of participants' lives
- In possession of a sense of humor
- Skill in group dynamics
- Experience in business and industry

2. **The instructor, regardless of background, completes the program as a participant first, then as a co-instructor with another experienced instructor.**

3. **In staffing and program activities, role models are sought, especially non-traditional role models.**

In that many female single parents come from dysfunctional families, it is beneficial to relate positively to non-threatening, supportive males. It is also essential for them to be open to non-traditional occupations that pay a living wage. Thus composition of the staff, of itself, can be a learning tool.

Enlisting local women in non-traditional occupations as speakers is helpful. There is often little support for rural women to enter non-traditional occupations, regardless of their wage-earning potential.

Career planning activities should be consistent with the regional labor market. One single parent advocate said that in some areas, traditional female health occupations offer the best employment opportunities and wages/benefits.

4. **Former participants are staff members.**

Parents who have used the services can make outstanding staff. They are creditable role models for those currently in the program, providing continuity in philosophy and practices. This continuity is especially helpful for children cared for at program sites.

The program may have to pay for training, but it appears to be a very good investment if the individual is right.

5. **Professional development activities are provided for all staff. Child care workers serving the program should also be in-serviced.**

Particularly for teen parents, child care providers can be seen either as a tremendous support or as adversaries. In-service can help child care providers learn how to involve teen parents, how to engender their trust, what they respond to, and the like.

Recruitment

- 1. Promotional efforts and recruitment attract people for whom the program is appropriate.**

Promotional materials should include statistics on participants who have benefitted and what has happened to them in terms of education and employment.

Materials should be free of negative connotations. Don't let your own materials stigmatize your program and participants.

- 2. Successful programs rely on other agencies to refer prospective participants but they also contact participants personally, especially when the program is new.**

Education and Training

- 1. The program is closely linked with post-secondary adult education, especially 2-year vocational-technical colleges.**

For most single parents, education and training is their only hope for economic self-sufficiency. Barriers to additional education are so much greater than for other adults in terms of fear, lack of family support, poverty, child care responsibilities, and lack of transportation. Every effort must be made to help participants avail themselves of additional training in spite of the barriers.

- 2. Participants are taken to post-secondary adult campuses to meet faculty and tour facilities.**

Brochures cannot take the place of actually seeing and experiencing a campus. A tour can make the prospect of additional education much less intimidating.

- 3. Program accountability requirements recognize that single parents typically require more time to complete educational programs than more traditional students or other parents from two-parent households.**

- 4. Local businesses participate in the program.**

Single parents benefit when business representatives discuss business opportunities and requirements. Also, a company with close contact with a program will often hire participants.

Curriculum

- 1. The curriculum is organized and in written form, but flexible enough to accommodate a variety of participant needs.**

Each group of single parents has different needs and expectations partly due to individual differences and partly due to the dynamics of the group. A curriculum must be developed and then adapted for each group.

Instructors should determine the needs of the group at the start of the program.

- 2. The best programs give people choices.**

Participants should be given as many choices as possible — field trip sites, menus, bus routes (e.g. who gets picked up first), and the like. People learn to be good decision-makers through practice in making decisions. Choices empower people.

- 3. Every participant has written goals with periodic review by a staff person or counselor.**

- 4. Every participant leaves the program with a polished resume and a plan for the future.**

- 5. The curriculum provides ample opportunities for focused discussion and group problem-solving.**

Both adult and teen parents agree the opportunity to discuss personal problems with others in similar situations is the best part of the program.

GETTING STARTED

The start-up activities suggested here are in a general sequence, but many will be conducted simultaneously. Activities 2 and 3, for instance, could be accomplished at the same time. The steps will also need to be repeated throughout the life of the program.

COMPLETED (✓)

1. ☐ Visit several other ongoing successful programs.
2. ☐ Conduct needs assessment of area to determine services already available and how many people are in need of the program.
3. ☐ Have business cards printed.
4. ☐ Visit the following to become acquainted with services offered, how to work together, and how each may refer participants to the other.
 - ☐ County Health Nurse
 - ☐ County Department of Social Services
 - ☐ Private Social Service Agencies
 - ☐ School Counselor, Social Worker, Nurse
 - ☐ VTAE College and other post-secondary education
 - ☐ Wisconsin Job Service
 - ☐ Private Industry Council (PIC)
 - ☐ Department of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR)
 - ☐ Head Start
 - ☐ Alcohol and Drug Abuse Programs
 - ☐ Salvation Army
 - ☐ Ministry Association
 - ☐ Power Company (for low-income identification programs and deferred energy payments)
5. ☐ Form advisory committee.
6. ☐ Submit press release to local media announcing development of the program to reach interested agencies, groups, or potential participants.
7. ☐ Determine project objectives and staff and facility needs.

Ring binders are ideal for participant materials. The binder keeps handouts organized, yet is flexible — pages can easily be added or exchanged.

One program furnished its child care room with good quality used cribs, playpens, high chairs, rockers and toys just by placing a request in the local newspaper.

8. ☐ Select site (Read rental or purchase agreement and also be aware of DILHR codes for child care facilities, if applicable.)
9. ☐ Post job openings.
10. ☐ Conduct interviews and select candidates. (Have a list of standard interview questions.)
11. ☐ Notify all applicants not hired with a letter of thanks for their interest.
12. ☐ Develop promotional brochure.
13. ☐ Contact state agencies for in-service programs.
14. ☐ Provide in-service for staff.
15. ☐ Meet with staff as a group to discuss project goals. Have them develop individual objectives to carry out project goals.
16. ☐ Arrange for participant transportation.
17. ☐ Arrange for participant child care.
18. ☐ Develop assessment and intake procedures.
19. ☐ Develop plan for face-to-face participant recruitment.
 - ☐ 1. Food distribution sites
 - ☐ 2. Women-Infants-Children (WIC) sites.
 - ☐ 3. _____
20. ☐ Develop curriculum.
21. ☐ Arrange field trips and speakers.
22. ☐ Begin enrollment for first group.

Parents and children from
Merrill's program
"Self-Sufficiency for
Teen Parents."
(Photo by Becky Paine)



DON'T DO THIS

Staff interviewed for this project were gracious enough to contribute a number of approaches they found unsuccessful.

1. Do NOT make participation a requirement.

People who are required to participate, for instance, by a social service agency, do not experience the same positive personal growth reported by those who volunteer.

2. Do NOT allow non-program personnel to slot participants into the program without approval of program staff.

Without the control of program staff, people are placed in the program for whom the experience is not appropriate. The result is failure for someone who may already have suffered frustration and failure. It also robs others who could benefit greatly. No participant should be enrolled without assessment.

3. Do NOT house the program in a physical location that is likely to have uncomfortable memories for participants.

This includes sites in the court house, social service agencies, parole offices, and even high schools where many adults suffered as students. Even if the price is right, locations which make participants tense or uncomfortable are poor choices.

4. Do NOT allow participants to regularly ignore requirements such as being on time, attending all sessions, preparing for class, and the like.

In attempting to create a relaxed and non-threatening atmosphere, some programs are casual about tardiness, attendance, and preparation. Yet, by simulating these minimum requirements for education and work, the program can guide participants to more successful behaviors.

The key word is "regularly." Flexibility must be extended for occasional parenting and family crises. Regular violators, however, need help in setting short-term concrete goals to meet program requirements. The group can be of assistance in devising strategies for being punctual, for example.

If staff allow participants to ignore requirements, a powerful message is conveyed that it is really not all that important to be reliable. Secondly, powerful resentment builds up among the others which is counterproductive to all.

5. Do NOT design a program for adults that meets five days per week.

A more effective design is three-four days per week. Some of the factors that make a five-day week difficult for participants include the problem of finding and paying for child care and guilt many experience over leaving household and/or children (if children are not cared for on-site).

The shorter week allows for time to synthesize information and practice techniques.

6. Do NOT withdraw funds for single parents for child care and/or transportation before they have completed the program. (It happened!)

The flip side of this is to ensure adequate funds are available for the duration of the program before the commitment is made to the participant.

7. Do NOT rush into "touchy-feely" sensitivity techniques.

Sufficient time should elapse to enable staff to determine appropriateness of activities and participants' readiness. Many women in single parent programs have experienced physical or sexual abuse. They may find it uncomfortable and/or intimidating to be touched by others even in playful context.

8. Do NOT let the support offered by the program become a substitute for developing personal resources.

Staff report people can get hooked on a program and it can eventually impede progress toward self-sufficiency.

One antidote seems to be limiting the amount of time spent full-time in a program. Another is conscious effort on the part of staff to discourage dependence by participants and to avoid internalizing the successes and/or failures of participants.

This does not apply to teen parents who must finish high school and need at least several years to develop adult survival skills.

9. Do NOT forget many people consider finances a very personal subject.

Human service professionals dealing with a lot of paperwork relative to client finances and other personal matters, can be unaware of how embarrassing disclosures can be. Participants greatly appreciate tact and confidentiality.

Consider providing self-defense training both as a practical matter and to build self-reliance.

TEEN PARENTS

Most of the elements of effective programs for single parents are identical whether targeted for teen or adult parents. Programs for teen parents must also tend to some additional issues. The most obvious goal is to ensure students complete high school. Child care becomes even more essential in that students will most likely be involved in school five days per week.

Child care should be provided at least within easy walking distance of the school so parents can participate in the care of their children at noon or other free times. Some educators report day care centers within the school are considered "trophy rooms" by male students. The on-site care may inadvertently provide positive reinforcement for irresponsible behavior. It is something to consider, but the appropriateness of the available space for infant and child care, whether on or off campus, should be the major selection criteria.

Most teen or school age parents will be minors and many will be living with their parent(s). Most, by virtue of age, will not be equipped to deal with the relentless demands of raising infants and young children. In addition, young parents may be living with their child(ren) in extended families that are dysfunctional. Thus, learning positive parenting techniques is critically important.

Many communities and school boards are very uncomfortable even acknowledging teen pregnancy. Standards and expectations should be sufficiently rigorous so that programs are less vulnerable to charges that they reward teenage pregnancy.

It is ideal to have two group leaders for single parents to relate to, at least part of the time. Recognizing variations in style and viewpoint is helpful to participants.

AN IDEAL MODEL

The Head Start Family Education Program headquartered in Glenwood City, Wisconsin, appears to be an ideal model for delivering services to single parents. It is the only Head Start program in Wisconsin that requires attendance of both parents and children. The New Auburn site is featured here.

The program's strength is its holistic approach. Parents and children are picked up and taken home by bus. (Bus drivers are program staff.) Parents, children, and staff have breakfast and lunch at the site.

While infants and pre-schoolers are cared for and taught by professionals, parents focus on personal development — assertiveness, self-esteem, employment, career planning, family planning, getting a driver's license, consumer concerns, and child nurturing. Parents are taught discipline techniques used by the Head Start staff which provides consistency for the children.

Parents are frequently involved with the children in the Head Start classroom, leading activities or working along with their children. Parents also serve on parent committees and the Policy Council.



Jim Lola, Cook/Nutritionist — In addition to providing a positive male role model, Jim cooks and teaches menu planning, food shopping, and good cooking on a budget.

(Photo by Curtis E. Harrison)



Transportation and child care are essential for effective programs for rural single parents.

(Photo by Curtis E. Harrison)

To help participants focus on career and education plans, additional resource people are brought in. The G.E.D. instructor from Chippewa Valley Technical College is on-site twice a week to work with participants.

Of the eight staff members, four are former participants. Parents and children attend three days weekly, 9 a.m.-1 p.m., September-May. Families may remain in the program for two years ordinarily and for three years in special circumstances. Approximately forty families are served annually.

Head Start financial guidelines limit participation. They may exclude single parents who could benefit. That the program serves both single and two parent families does not appear to lessen the benefits for single parents.

Due to the comprehensiveness of the program it is, not surprisingly, labor intensive.

Evaluation of Existing Programs

A quality program for single parents should, at a minimum, be able to provide "yes" answers to these questions.

1. Is there an accurate longitudinal record of number served, years of operation, itemized annual budgets and the like?
2. Do participants have opportunities to evaluate the program and to provide feedback on what was most useful and what was less helpful?
3. Is there an advisory committee to provide advice and advocacy?
4. Has the advisory committee met at least once per year?
5. Are written advisory committee minutes available?
6. Are printed promotional materials available and up-to-date?
7. Is there evidence the program utilizes and coordinates with other agencies, including secondary and/or post-secondary educational institutions?
8. Does a documentable client assessment and intake procedure exist to ensure the program is an appropriate intervention for participants?
9. Is there evidence all participants had initial assessments and engaged in career planning activities including self-assessment, career exploration and interest inventories?
10. Does a curriculum outline exist showing what topics will be addressed for all groups? (Notwithstanding the fact that some groups may require more emphasis on some topics than others.)
11. Are child care and transportation needs met?
12. Do all participants leave with a polished resume?
13. Do all participants leave with a plan for the future and a clear idea of the next step?
14. Are opportunities for professional growth provided for all staff?
15. Are follow-up studies conducted periodically to measure participant progress?

Participant Objectives

Each program for single parents will vary in focus depending on the sponsoring agency and needs in the area. However, the following objectives address the most pressing needs expressed by single parents.

1. Prepare for education and/or employment with the goal of economic self-sufficiency.
2. Increase self-esteem.
3. Enhance parenting skills.
4. Improve decision-making ability.
5. Become knowledgeable about where to get needed services.
6. Learn how to manage personal finances.
7. Complete high school diploma, G.E.D., or high school equivalency, if needed.
8. Become knowledgeable about health care of mother and child, including contraceptive information.
9. Learn to deal effectively with single parent family issues — dating, child custody and support, child abuse, father's relationship and the like.
10. Others? _____
11. _____
12. _____

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